

Militants warn of more attacks on Kashmiri police

REUTERS, Jammu, India

A Pakistan-based militant group warned troops from special police units in India's troubled Jammu and Kashmir state to resign from their jobs or face further suicide attacks. The warning by Lashkar-e-Taiba, in a statement circulated to media organisations in the disputed Himalayan state late on Saturday, came a day after one of its suicide squads attacked the main police centre in Srinagar and killed nine Indian policemen.

Two of the four-member suicide squad were killed during the attack in the state's summer capital, which started on Friday night. The other two escaped, officials said.

"Police and Special Task Force (STF) personnel are warned to give up their jobs en masse failing which suicide squads would launch attacks on them," Lashkar-e-Taiba spokesman, Sallah-ud-Din, said in the statement.

STF units are anti-terrorist police and have been accused by Lashkar and other militant and separatist groups of killing detainees in Kashmir.

On Saturday morning, 15 people, including seven children, were burnt to death in an attack on a village 175 km north of Jammu, the winter capital of the strife-torn state.

Five of the dead were members of armed village defence committee, set up by the state government to help security forces combat militants in rural areas.

Indian FM to visit Myanmar

AFP, Guwahati

India and Myanmar are to sign a treaty to combat cross-border drug trafficking and a separatist insurgency during a visit by India's foreign minister next week, officials said Sunday.

Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh is due in Yangon on Tuesday for a three-day trip during which he will also discuss ways to boost trade and transport links.

It is the first high-level trip by an Indian leader to Myanmar since then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi visited in 1987.

Foreign ministry officials said Singh's trip will "signal New Delhi's interest in reviving close contacts with Yangon".

The officials said high on the agenda were "effective plans" to stem the flow of drugs from Myanmar into India through Moreh, the last border point in the north-eastern Indian state of Manipur.

They said a treaty would be signed next week following Singh's talks with Myanmar's military leaders.

Experts say drugs such as heroin and marijuana find their way into India's remote northeastern states from Laos, Thailand and Myanmar.

During his stay in Yangon, Singh is expected to call on Myanmar's army chief of staff Lieutenant General Tin Oo and top junta leader General Than Shwe.

India and Myanmar, which share a 1,643-kilometre border, pledged in 1999 to cooperate more closely and curb terrorism.

21 injured in Maoist attack in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Twenty-one people including a Chinese national were badly injured in an ambush by Nepal's extreme-leftist guerrillas, a home ministry spokesman said Sunday.

"Fourteen persons including a Chinese official working at a local hydro-power project, and seven policemen were badly injured after they fell into a booby-trap set up by the Maoists while transporting explosives... on Saturday," spokesman Gopendra Bahadur Pandey said.

The attack took place at Diysini Khola, nearly 200 kilometres north-west of Kathmandu.

Several of the Nepalese personnel and policemen were flown to Kathmandu for treatment while the Chinese national was being treated locally at a medical camp, Pandey said.

The condition of the other was described as "not so grave" he said, adding they were being treated locally.

Pandey said the jeep transporting the personnel hit landmines and the Maoist guerrillas attacked, exchanging fire with the police.

Some Maoists are believed to have been injured but there is no immediate confirmation of the number of Maoists injured or killed, the spokesman said.

Police recovered bundles of wire used for the mines, a pressure cooker used as a timing device and eight bombs, ministry officials said.

LTTE won't join peace talks if UK bans them

AP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels will not negotiate peace with the government if Britain outlaws them under a new anti-terrorist law that takes effect on February 19, said the London-based chief negotiator for the guerrillas.

British Home Secretary Jack Straw is drawing up a list of foreign organisations to be banned under the Terrorism Act, which defines terrorism as the use of threat for advancing a political or ideological cause.

A ban on Tiger operations would be a major blow to the rebels, who have fought the government since 1983 for an independent Tamil homeland in north and east Sri Lanka.

London is the international headquarters of the guerrilla group, which is banned in India, the United States and other countries.

"It's goodbye to the peace talks" if Britain bans the Tamil Tigers, London-based spokesman Anton Balasingham told Sudar Oli, a Tamil language newspaper in Colombo.

"If the talks are hindered, the struggle will intensify and the government should take responsibility for it," Balasingham said.

He said he urged Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim at a London meeting to convey his warning to the British government.

Norway is trying to bring the rebels and the Sri Lankan government back to the negotiating table for the first time in five years.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga downplayed rebel claims that a ban on its activities in Britain will disrupt any peace initiatives, state radio reported Sunday.

She cited the example of the Irish Republican Army, which is outlawed but involved in peace talks through its political wing, Sinn Fein.

The Sri Lankan government has long asked Britain to ban the Tamil rebels.

The rebels, who periodically use suicide bombers to attack civilian targets, say they are freedom fighters, not terrorists.

Britain's terrorism law will restrict not only the activities of terrorist organisations, but also those of associated groups that collect funds and conduct propaganda campaign on its soil.

Russia, Iran to sign arms deals by year-end

AFP, Moscow

Russia and Iran will sign a raft of defence deals by the end of the year, a top Russian arms export official said on Sunday, cited by Interfax news agency.

Viktor Komardin, deputy director of the Russian weapons sales company, Rosoboronexport, told journalists at an airshow in the Indian city of Bangalore that the first contracts could be signed by the middle of the year.

He added that Defence Minister Igor Sergeev had discussed concrete arms sales during his controversial trip to Iran in December.

Russia told the United States in November it was scrapping a secret five-year-old agreement to cease conventional arms sales to Iran, prompting the White House to threaten Moscow with sanctions.

Iran's military hardware has been little updated since the revolution, when Western governments blocked advanced technology transfers to the Islamic republic after the overthrow of the US-backed shah.

Russian officials blasted the US threat as "unacceptable" but insisted Moscow would only sell Tehran defensive weapons and would respect all international agreements.



Civilians who were aboard the Los Angeles-class fast attack submarine USS Greenville during its collision with the Japanese fishing training vessel Ehime Maru on Friday, are transported back to Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, the next day. The Greenville returned to her home port later in the day.

Submarine-boat collision

US apologises to Japan as search continues

REUTERS, Honolulu

As the search intensified in choppy seas off the coast of Hawaii for nine missing Japanese, investigators on Saturday focused on whether a nuclear powered US submarine that struck and sank their trawler conducted necessary safeguards before surfacing.

US President George W Bush and the US Navy, meanwhile, expressed regret to Japan on Saturday as three US agencies, the Navy, Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board, announced investigations of the crash.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell telephoned Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono "to convey his regrets and apology and also the president's regrets and condolences," said David Denny, a

State Department spokesman.

At a news conference in Hawaii, Adm. Thomas Fargo, commander in chief of the US Pacific Fleet, said, "While it's not yet clear how this accident occurred, it is both tragic and regrettable. I would like to express my apologies to all of those involved."

The Greenville, a 360-foot 6,900-tonne attack submarine based at nearby Pearl Harbour, surfaced on Friday afternoon, crashing into the 499-tonne trawler carrying 35 people, including fisheries students who were learning commercial trawling.

Within 10 minutes, the trawler Ehime Maru sank into 18,000 feet of water nine miles south of Diamond Head off Honolulu, Hawaii.

Twenty-five people were rescued from the trawler but nine people, including four 17-year-old students, two teachers and three crew mem-

bers, were missing.

Fargo said the Navy has launched an investigation that will focus on the submarine's surfacing procedure. He said both an acoustic and a visual search should be conducted prior to surfacing.

"That's what we would expect and believe happened in this particular case. That certainly will be the subject of the investigation," Fargo said.

The admiral stressed that the Greenville was operating normally and had been engaged in routine operations. Rear Adm Charles Griffiths Jr., commander of Submarine Group Nine, was designated as investigating officer, Fargo said.

The Greenville returned to Pearl Harbour on its own power with a tugboat escort after having taken part in search and rescue efforts.

UN to probe HR violations despite Israeli objections

AFP, Gaza City

A United Nations panel will go ahead with a planned probe of alleged Israeli violations of Palestinian human rights despite objections by Israel, one of its members said Saturday.

South African professor John Dugard said on his arrival here that the Israeli government "has indicated that it will not cooperate with us, but there are facts that can be found by other means."

However Israeli military radio reported that the Israeli government would not cooperate with the panel.

Israel took its position because the commission has already determined that the army has committed "war crimes" in the occupied territories, the radio said.

A special session of the UN Human Rights Commission created the committee on October 19, just three weeks after the start of an anti-Israeli uprising in the Palestinian territories that has claimed nearly 400 lives.

Speaking after a meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Dugard said "our task is to investi-



Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon (L) shakes hands with caretaker prime minister Ehud Barak yesterday in Jerusalem where they held their second meeting in 48 hours. Barak remains in charge of government affairs until Sharon forms a coalition in the parliament.

gate and examine the situation as best we can. We will speak to people in Palestine and we are hoping to speak to people in Israel."

He added that if the Israeli gov-

ernment does not provide information, "we will get this information from non-government organisations in Israel."

Taliban plans new move to resolve Laden issue

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia Sunday raised the prospect of a "fourth proposal" with the United States to resolve their tug-of-war over terror suspect Osama bin Laden.

"We call upon the United States not to close the doors to understanding. We are considering to work out a fourth proposal on the issue of Osama bin Laden," Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel told AFP.

But he said the latest proposal had not yet been chalked out.

"We are just prepared to consider it," he said, speaking from the southern city of Kandahar.

The United States has ordered Afghanistan's ruling militia to close its New York office in line with the UN sanctions slapped last month to punish the Taliban rulers for refusing to hand over bin Laden.

Taliban sheltering the millionaire Saudi dissident had earlier said Washington should provide the Taliban Supreme Court with evidence of bin Laden's alleged involvement in terrorist attacks against the United States.

It later offered to keep bin Laden under the surveillance of the 55-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

The Taliban's third proposal was for a panel of clerics from three other Islamic states to come to Afghanistan to deal with bin Laden's case.

The United States has rejected the offers, leaving the two countries bitterly deadlocked over the case.

A US court has indicted bin Laden to stand trial for allegedly masterminding twin US embassy bombings in East Africa in 1998, but the Taliban insist he is a "guest" and there is no evidence against him.

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Indonesia landslides death toll 89

AFP, Jakarta

The death toll in landslides and floods triggered by days of incessant torrential rain in Indonesia's West Java province has risen to 89, many of them illegal gold miners buried alive, reports and officials said Sunday.

"It is still unclear as to how many people died yesterday but at least 25 people in Cipanas sub-district were killed there," said a duty police

officer in Rangkasbitung, the main town of the worst-hit Lebak district.

The evening daily Suara Pembaruan put the death toll at 88 people killed in the floods and mudslides, which inundated 5,214 homes in 46 villages in Lebak, some 60 kilometres east of Jakarta.

"Our difficulty is lack of communications, many phone lines for other sub-district offices are still down," the officer told AFP by telephone from the Lebak district town of

Rangkasbitung.

As of Sunday, 76 bodies had been found in Cipanas sub-district while 11 others died in Muncang sub-district, Pembaruan quoted the district's chief of social affairs, Eri Rachmat, as saying.

At least 36 of the victims in Cipanas were illegal goldminers who had come from the outlying districts. They were buried alive in Lebak Situ village, the state Antara news agency said.

Quake brings water to arid Gujarat

AFP, Nehar, India

The powerful earthquake that tore through a swathe of western India last month has awakened deep underground water channels in this arid and inhospitable region.

Residents of the village of Nehar, about 30 kilometres from the shattered town of Bachau and accessible only by a potholed dirt track, showed AFP huge holes in the ground where water was gushing out of the ground.

"The moment the earthquake began I rushed out of my house and saw fountains of water shooting about six feet (two metres) high from Karsanbhai Ahir's field," Hirabhai Ahir said in the Kutchi dialect.

Nehar, a group of about 40 houses set on a vast dusty expanse of land dotted with thorny shrubs, is on the edge of the Rann of Kutch desert.

The area north-west of Nehar is controlled by the Indian army and is out of bounds for visitors. Pakistan is just two days away by foot.

Most of the residents of the village are subsistence farmers who cultivate the soil when it rains once every two years.

Karsanbhai Ahir's field has been severely damaged by the huge January 26 earthquake, which killed at least 30,000 people in the state of Gujarat. One hundred feet long and a few inches wide fissures traverse the field. The nearby dirt track has also been cracked open.

Hirabhai Ahir has vivid memories of the quake and the gushing water. Wearing a soiled turban, large gold ear-studs, a traditional white waist-high skirt and a loincloth, he animatedly narrates the episode.

"The water gushed forth like geysers for a few minutes and then died down. I was thrown down by the earthquake. I have never seen a sight like this in all my life. I did not go close to the water as people were crying out for help from the collapsed houses."

Ahir's daughter was one of 31 people who died in this village of 1,300 people.



Women and children carry water in Nehar village, 30 km from the shattered town of Bachau, yesterday. The powerful earthquake that tore through a swathe of western India last month has awakened deep underground water channels in this arid and inhospitable region, with water gushing out of huge holes in the ground.

The blistering heat of the day evaporated the water in the field leaving behind cracked, slushy top soil covered with a fine layer of salt.

"The water was very salty. We brought our camels to the water but they refused to drink it," he said.

Sagan Bijal was cutting the shrubs for firewood when the ground shook and the water erupted in front of him.

"There were fountains spraying water all over the field," he said, pointing out holes in the ground along the fissures.

Two kilometres north of Nehar set in dense thorny shrubs is the dry bed of the Rowara pond which is owned by the village.

Villagers dug a pit about 12 feet deep to look for water about two months ago and found salty water.

"I came here on the day of the earthquake and found that the water had turned sweet," said Deepak Ahir whose father owns 100 acres of dry land on which he grows castor seed and medicinal plants.

"We got rains this year between July and September. By November the pond had dried up. This pit was dug sometime in December and the water was salty."

In another part of the pond the ground has been pushed up a few inches, along a five-metre (17 feet) length.

Deepak Ahir points out a few holes in the ground from where water seems to have spouted out and flowed into a pool. The dried and cracked ground here does not have any layer of salt.

"This water was sweet and wild buffaloes came and drank it up," he said.

Himanshu Bhatt, Kutch police chief, said he had received reports of similar phenomena at several spots in the Rann of Kutch.

"We have reports of several springs, geysers coming up in the Rann of Kutch. Initially a lot of water seems to have flowed out and then dried up over the past few days. I saw a lot of small pools of water and even a fine spray of salt on the roads where the water had spouted."

Media reports, quoting satellite pictures, said the tremor had probably pushed up the mythical, subterranean Saraswati River or the Indus river which had disappeared after an earthquake in the 19th century.